

Convocation 2012

Convocation Address

by President Ronald D. Liebowitz

September 9, 2012

Mead Memorial Chapel

Welcome. It is my pleasure, on behalf of the faculty, staff, trustees, and your fellow Middlebury students, to extend a warm welcome to you, the class of 2016. I hope you enjoyed orientation, which I know was the product of a lot of work on the part of so many.

Even with last night's dramatic storm, your introduction to Vermont has been rather serene compared to last year's entering class, which arrived along with the remnants of Hurricane Irene. That storm, though it thankfully spared this particular community, caused massive flooding that destroyed roads, bridges, and, unfortunately, many homes in large swaths of the state. The country saw how Vermonters rose to the occasion, rolled up their sleeves, and tackled the difficult situation they faced without pointing fingers or feeling sorry for themselves. Many in the state saw the character of Middlebury College students, too, as early-returning students volunteered here in town and in neighboring communities, some as far away as the New Hampshire border. They made a huge difference in the lives of many they didn't even know. This kind of caring and acting, as I tell many, is a hallmark of our campus culture, and I hope that you, all of you in the Class of 2016, will strengthen that culture not only in times of crisis, but in your everyday doings at the College.

The harsh and variable weather so often mentioned in stories about Vermont, and something you will see far more clearly come winter time, is one of the things that defines this College, and creates the kind of environment in which friendships and personal relationships are more important, more meaningful, and more long-lasting than in most other settings. There are few distractions in this beautiful, relatively remote, part of New England, which means students here rely heavily on one another for their social, intellectual, creative, and academic sustenance and energy.

And though one of the great and sometimes unnoticed benefits of being at a place like Middlebury is the opportunity for students to get involved and make a difference in the town, in Addison County, and even in Montpelier, our state capital, living and learning at this institution revolves around being part of *this* intellectual community. It is a community filled with remarkably talented students, dedicated staff, and the very best faculty you can find, so long as you are ready and willing to be challenged and to take advantage of their talents and high expectations.

But I will come back to this topic *after* I provide some background to the cause that should still be circulating among you, and to this College, now your College.

Gamaliel Painter was one of the visionaries who helped to found Middlebury College more than two hundred years ago. He could barely read and write, yet he was wise to the world, had a knack for assessing risk, and the remarkable ability to master whatever kind of work he pursued or needed to get done: a self-starter in the true sense of the word. He was a successful businessman, skilled negotiator, bold entrepreneur, and a farmer, and was always looking to improve his and, later in life, this town's lot. Germane to us here, and to our College, Painter purchased land on speculation just east of the Otter Creek during a chance trip to the region, and then, years later, when things got stale in his native Salisbury, Connecticut, he moved his family to Middlebury—largely at the nudging of his wife—to take his chances on a new life. When Painter moved his family to Middlebury, the population numbered fewer than the number of first-years living in Battell today.

Painter, largely uneducated, saw the need for his two sons, along with the children of other townspeople, to obtain a better education than what he, Painter, had received while growing up in Connecticut. He began efforts to establish a grammar school, or what he called a central academy, to provide such an education. After several years, in 1797, with the help of Seth Storrs and several prominent Middlebury families, Painter secured land on the west side of the Otter Creek and then won a charter to begin a grammar school.

A year later in the fall of 1798, Timothy Dwight, then president of Yale and, at the time, New England's most esteemed educator, visited Middlebury. The Yale president was in Vermont to complete some research on the economic geography of the region, but also to enjoy Vermont's wondrous natural environment while convalescing from a recent illness. The trustees of the new grammar school, and Painter in particular, believed strongly that if the fledgling town of Middlebury was to become prosperous, and the greater Champlain Valley was to become a viable economic, cultural, and political region, both would need a college or university. Gaining the approval and support of someone of Timothy Dwight's stature would make Painter's goal all the more possible, and in fact would prove necessary for it to happen.

In what College historian David Stameshkin and Painter biographer Storrs Lee describe as Vermont's version of a Potemkin Village affair, Painter and the grammar school trustees wined and dined Dwight during his visit to Middlebury. They asked a local inn-keeper to host what was described as the best prepared meal anyone had ever witnessed in town. The hosts garnished the meal—and the guests—with the finest liqueurs one could find in town, and by the end of the dinner, Painter and his collaborators secured Dwight's support for a charter for what would become this college.

But that was only part one of the larger project for Painter. Soon after the noteworthy Dwight dinner, Painter, with a letter of support from Dwight in hand, began his work with the Vermont legislature to gain permission to establish his college in Middlebury. His petition failed to make the state assembly's agenda in two successive legislative sessions—the 1798 and 1799 gatherings—but though irritated and impatient, Painter persevered. As a way to sway the legislators to take up his cause, he offered the town of Middlebury, with its spanking new court house, to play host to the state's legislative session in 1800, and his offer was accepted. In those days, the state

capital was not located in Montpelier, as it is today. In fact it was not located in any one place, but rather alternated each year between a town on the eastern side of the Green Mountains one year and one on the western side the next. That is how Painter got the legislature to conduct its business in Middlebury in 1800.

The 1798 and 1799 legislative sessions might have ignored Painter's petition for a charter, but the third try was a charm. During the three-week legislative session in 1800, Middlebury citizens, merchants, and tavern owners gave the visiting legislators the red carpet treatment, hoping to help Painter and his associates attain the much sought-after charter. Despite the significant and even hostile protests from the 20 representatives from Burlington and Chittenden County, where a university charter was awarded nine years earlier, the assembly approved Painter's petition, and officially granted a charter for what would become Middlebury College on November 1, 1800. The opposition from Burlington was probably due to a large dose of embarrassment: even though their town received the state's first charter for a university in 1791, the university had yet to hire a faculty member or teach a single student more than nine years later.

Painter and his colleagues—all New England Puritans, and most of them educated at Yale—donated \$4,150 to construct the first college building. Classes began in the newly constructed building, which sat on the site of present-day Twilight Hall. For nineteen years after the College's founding, Gamaliel Painter walked the streets of the town and carried with him the famous cane that is circulating among you now. At his death in 1819, Painter left a bequest of more than \$13,000 to the College, a huge sum of money at the time, and it served to secure the College's future.

I provide this background so you can appreciate Painter's remarkable vision and determination, and become acquainted with one of the College's most important founders. His cane, a replica of which each of you will receive at Commencement, has become the College's most important symbol, and has come to represent many of the things we aspire to inculcate in our students—in all of you. The spirit of Gamaliel Painter lives on in the rich history of this College. You, the newest members of its extended family, are now a part of this long and great history, and your College welcomes you today with open arms, an open heart, and some very high aspirations.

Those aspirations are rooted in what we already know about you...what you accomplished before you arrived. You are a diverse collection of bright, inquisitive, energetic, and eager learners and doers. As you bring your talents and experiences to this community, I challenge you to take advantage of the committed and talented faculty you now have as mentors and teachers, our dedicated staff, and students from the other three classes with whom you will form bonds of friendship that will endure well beyond your time here. Your fellow students, in particular, should be a remarkable source of inspiration to you. I encourage you to seek out as broad a swath of friends as you can. We strive as an institution to build a student body that is diverse in its background and life experiences for a reason, and that is to enrich your learning environment both inside and outside the classroom.

I know you will take advantage of many of the academic opportunities before you, but I also know you are likely to feel some frustration when you can't do as many of the things you want to. But *not doing it all* is sometimes a good thing. Doing things in balance will be a challenge because so many of you have been doing so many things for a good part of your lives; it is hard to slow down and recognize the time and place to stop and delve deeper and more seriously into something that inspires you and is likely to become an important part of your future.

In order to help you get the most out of your time here, I pass along the following advice:

No matter how much you wish to extend it, the day is 24 hours long.

The work load per course at Middlebury is demanding, and so when you think about how you will allocate your time, make sure to leave enough time to cover all you will be asked to do in four, not one, two, or three classes.

View your time here as a way to study both deeply and broadly. That is the advantage and indeed the purpose of coming to a liberal arts college. Unlike what you would do at a technical or pre-professional school, we require you to select a major, but also to take courses across the curriculum, selecting classes in disciplines you might have never taken before, or even knew existed. Those courses have not only different content, but many will introduce you to different ways of knowing and of thinking. Becoming familiar with various ways of pursuing, absorbing, and creating knowledge is part of the richness of your liberal arts education and one that will forever foster the desire to continue learning throughout your lives.

Resist the myth that more is better—for example that two majors are necessarily better than one—and instead take advantage of the strength of our faculty and curriculum by taking multiple courses in the arts, humanities, languages, the social sciences, and natural sciences. You will graduate four years from now better educated and just as prepared to go on for a Ph.D. in any discipline, or to pursue any career you wish as you would have been had you completed a double major.

More importantly, by taking courses broadly across the curriculum, chances are you will meet a faculty member who will excite you by material you would have otherwise never encountered, and perhaps change your life. Science majors might find a deep reading of Homer's "The Odyssey" or John Stewart Mill's "On Liberty," or doing landscape painting, each for the first time, central to the rest of their lives, just as literature majors might discover a passion and life-long interest in ecology, molecular biology, or non-proliferation studies after taking a course in these areas despite never having had the opportunity to do so before.

As you think about the next four years try to think about striking a balance in what you study, in what you do outside your academic work, and in what you do to create a satisfying social life. Contrary to how it might seem from afar, the transition to college is never seamless for anybody. Finding a significant connection to something here and finding it early—an athletics team, an improv group, a literary club, artists and entrepreneurs at the Old Stone Mill, or to any of the College's 140+ student organizations—will provide the kind of social entrée that will make the transition here easier and richer. This takes initiative, but we make it relatively easy for you: I suggest you attend the College's activities fair, where you can meet members of many student organizations and learn about what each does and how to get involved. This year's fair will take place Friday, September 14, at 4:30 p.m. on Hepburn Road—in front of Proctor and right behind the Chapel

At the reception for parents this past week I was asked a question I have been asked just about every year since I became president in

2004. I was asked what my hopes were for this incoming class. I said, as I have said before, that I hoped members of this class, and really all of our students, would take advantage of the wealth of resources and opportunities here before they graduate. I explained that our faculty, in addition to offering an exceptional experience in the classroom, are poised to mentor our students and to help them connect with a remarkable array of people and programs to help them delve deeply into their interests, become better educated in the broad sense of the word, and develop the kind of character that is most likely to come from learning broadly and living responsibly in a community like ours.

My hopes, then, revolve not around any particular measured outcomes, *per se*, but rather around how much of what we offer you, you will engage and let engage you. If you explore all that is here, connect meaningfully with as broad array of courses and people as possible, and pursue your passions with great vigor, I am confident you will become not only accomplished in your chosen field of study, but you will also develop into the inquisitive life-long learner that a liberal arts college strives to develop and proudly produces—graduates who are confident and fully prepared to meet the economic, social, and ethical challenges of this increasingly complex world. But so much of this is up to you, and will depend on how willing you are to take the initiative.

From the little I told you today about Gamaliel Painter, you should be able to deduce how Painter would approach a Middlebury education if he had the chance to begin his studies with you today. As his symbolic cane makes its way around the chapel, may Painter's legacy be felt by each and every one of you over the next four years, and may you challenge yourself to make the most of your time at this remarkable College, just as you know Painter would have done.

Thank you, and best of luck, class of 2016.

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